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Honors as a Transformative Experience:

The Role of Liberal Arts Honors Programs in Community Colleges

In the past, an honors program at a community college may have seemed like a contradiction in terms. After all, honors students at four-year colleges are thought to be the best of the best, while community college students are often considered “diamonds in the rough.” Many community college honors students have intellectual abilities that may not have been developed in their high schools, or they weren’t encouraged to develop their abilities by their parents and friends, or they don’t have high expectations of themselves. Whatever the case, these students are in need of more than just the standard courses taught at community colleges. These are students capable of excelling in standard liberal arts courses at community colleges, but may have not fully developed their abilities because they can earn high grades with little effort. If we are truly to educate this segment of the community college population, then we need to ask: Who are these students and what do they need? To be more specific: How can we take these students from where they are now and encourage them to become successful professionals? To understand how to reach this goal, we must begin with an analysis of where the students are now.

Unfortunately, students frequently devalue intellectual activity, thinking that college is merely a means to an end—enabling graduates to earn more money than those without a diploma. For students like this, intellectual activity consists in putting the correct answer on a sheet of paper—a simple information transfer. Simplicity is valued over complexity. Complex perspectives are reduced to subjective opinions that have neither presuppositions nor implications, with no rational basis for deciding among them. The rules of ordinary conversation are substituted for the norms of academic conversation. In short, there is a cultural conflict between the student discourse community and the academic discourse community. Once one begins to view the problem in terms of cultural transformation, rather than teaching students a subject matter, other issues come into play that are difficult to address in three-credit courses, issues such as behavioral and

attitudinal problems that impinge on their academic careers. If we take seriously the need for a cultural transformation, then, as with any other form of cultural change, students need to be immersed in the new culture until they become fluent in it and adopt its values and modes of discourse as their own.

The question, then, is what is required in an honors program to effect such a transformation? Such cultural immersion requires a full-time commitment on the part of students because only the creation of a learning community is strong enough to provide an alternative culture that will shift student expectations. Many four-year colleges are able to build learning communities into their honors programs through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and by housing students together to guarantee interactions among students outside of class. Community colleges do not have this option because students do not live on campus and

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it is difficult to engage them in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities because of their work schedule. (Typically, students at community colleges hold down full- or part-time jobs in addition to attending college full-time.) This means that the only place a learning community can be built is in the classroom. However, in order to do this, it is necessary to dismantle the most sacrosanct of college traditions, the very basis of college education, the most unquestioned of all the institutions within the college community, the holiest of holies—the three-credit course.

At the Community College of Philadelphia, we have created a 15-credit course taught cooperatively by six to eight faculty members. Of course, such an arrangement is institutionally impossible. In order to be paid (at least at the Community College of Philadelphia), faculty must be assigned to three-credit courses. The computer is not programmed to handle a course taught by multiple instructors. What is more, such a course would not be transferable. What would be the discipline name? What are the comparable courses at other colleges? The solution to this problem is to find or develop five three-credit courses that reflect the work being done in the 15-credit unit, recognizing that this is an administrative fiction, a Platonic lie that conceals a greater truth. On the one hand, students are actually getting the content described in the five courses. On the other hand, the courses don't actually exist as separate courses. Instead, a group of students is given to a group of teachers who have been told to educate them. Given the entrenched character of the three-credit course, though, there is a tendency for the 15-credit unit to devolve into separate courses and this must be guarded against, if the program is to be successful.

The tendency to separate into three-credit courses is not only a result of the bureaucratic structure of the college, but the putative right of every faculty member to control his or her own classroom, to determine the intellectual content, the testing, the grading, and the rules and regulations. It is even difficult for faculty to think beyond the three-credit course because, after

all, what could replace it? Yet, how could we build a learning community into an honors program unless there is fundamental agreement among faculty members about what is to count as intellectual discourse, what rules and regulations are to be enforced, and what testing and grading look like? Administrators of honors programs are familiar with the problem of how to guarantee uniformity among the various classes and sections of classes when faculty insist on exercising their academic freedom, and when there are disagreements among disciplines (and individual faculty members) as to what is to count as an honors experience. The problem is actually easier to solve in one 15-credit course than in five three-credit courses because faculty are put into a position where they have to agree on the shape of the course in order to run a program. The process of development in an honors program like this is Darwinian. Faculty who are unable or unwilling to work closely with their colleagues will drop out and after a number of semesters (each with its own set of complications), the honors program will achieve an evolutionary stable state.

On a more positive note, the curriculum development process also acts as a faculty development project. Content area faculty can be required to incorporate primary source material, a seminar approach and an interdisciplinary focus into their teaching. Writing instructors are required by the interdisciplinary nature of the program to develop a writing-across-the-curriculum approach to the teaching of writing and to include content teachers in the design of the writing component. Faculty in general must justify their content and teaching practices to their colleagues. While it is impossible to reproduce in a three-credit course what is done in a 15-credit course, faculty often try to incorporate the practices developed in the honors program into their regular courses, enriching the entire college curriculum.

If the goal is to move students into a certain mode of discourse, then the content is not as important as the processes. However, it is necessary to build some content into the process and that content has to cross over among a number of disciplines. At the Community College of Philadelphia, we have solved that problem by focusing the course around intellectual history. Many philosophy courses, all art history and history courses, and most world literature courses are organized historically. Thus, the program can put together an intellectual historian, with a history of philosophy instructor, an art historian, and a teacher of world literature. Supplement these with an interdisciplinary seminar in the humanities and the social sciences and a writing-across-the-curriculum writing course and you have a 15-credit course. From the perspective of process, the course would center on the teaching of the high-level reading, writing and thinking required for the interpretation of texts—a central practice of intellectual history, philosophy and literature courses. This is reinforced through a series of reading and writing assignments in a variety of environments that include lectures, seminars, writing groups, exam preps, and study groups. Another content model used at the college focused one semester on the social sciences and one

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semester on the humanities, so that students come to understand the similarities that bind the social sciences together and differentiate them from the humanities.

The process agenda of the program centers on countering standard intellectual moves that lead students into a conflict with academic discourse. One tendency of students is to approach intellectual issues with a strategy of simplifying in order to understand. Students want to reduce complex intellectual issues to two opposing “opinions,” and are happiest with “sound bites” and slogans as answers to complex problems. However, lawyers, teachers, business people, etc. are required to develop more nuanced positions, to be able to exhibit the complexity inherent in intellectual debate. The honors program at the Community College of Philadelphia is built around providing intellectual complexity for students who might be resistant to this type of rigor. Complexity is built into seminars, where faculty members challenge students’ easy interpretations of texts, into writing assignments that are subject to review in writing groups, into exam preps where students are taught how to think through examination questions and into lectures that model the complexity of intellectual thought. In short, the honors program at the Community College of Philadelphia tries to create an intellectual atmosphere in which debates over ideas are taken seriously and in which student attempts to simplify are constantly challenged.

To build an intellectually stimulating environment, it is necessary to select readings for seminar that present interpretive challenges and to design writing assignments that defy easy answers. In seminar, some texts are chosen because they have multiple possible interpretations, some texts might have a surface and a deeper interpretation, other texts raise issues about audience and what the author is trying to accomplish with that audience, some texts exhibit a complexity that can profitably be worked out through discussion, some texts are part of a larger debate, and some just have an interesting feature that is likely to provoke discussion. For example, the Luther-Erasmus debate on free will is interesting for its rhetoric, but also has a subtle subtext about whether these issues are important enough to warrant a break from the Catholic church. *The Bacchae* is clearly a tragedy, but it doesn’t fit well with Aristotle’s definition of tragedy and it is difficult to tell what we are supposed to make of the Dionysian and its relationship to society. Thucydides’

History of the Peloponnesian Wars offers numerous opportunities to analyze the rhetoric of the various speeches. It is difficult to determine what exactly Herodotus takes himself to be doing in his Histories, since he offers such a wide variety of types of stories for a wide variety of purposes. How are we to read Part II of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, which appears to be an explanation of how Underground Man got to be as he is, yet is narrated by an unreliable narrator?

Seminars are as much about process as intellectual content. Most of the students have never engaged in intellectual discussions in front of a class. At best, they have been asked to answer questions that have a right or wrong answer or have been asked to give an opinion about a topic. Seminars are designed to introduce students to academic conversations. Often, students cannot distinguish the rules of conversation in academic discourse from those of informal conversation. They do not know what types of remarks are expected and what types are prohibited by the norms of academic discourse.

The distinction between student (beginner) culture and professional (faculty) culture is central to the way seminars are conducted. As with any culture, it is impossible to state all of the “rules” of acceptable behavior. Often they are only noticed in their breach. If we can characterize the different cultures as playing different games, then the goal of the seminars is to move students into playing the faculty game. When beginners (students) approach the interpretation of texts, they typically make moves considered inappropriate by faculty. When asked for a justification for their interpretation, students often give a genetic (autobiographical) account, rather than a justification. When asked to point to features of a text that would support their interpretation, students often simply quote the text, as if the text transparently supported their interpretation. Students will often ignore the conversation and introduce new interpretations without trying to show the inadequacy of previous interpretations, or even the relationship between the new and the older interpretations. Students will unselfconsciously offer new interpretations thinking that they are merely supporting a previous interpretation.

Faculty members try to block these moves by instilling their culture into the classroom. Faculty culture values discourse that moves new interpretations into a relationship with interpretations on the floor, that provides interpretations of a text that make sense of what the text does, rather than merely explicating what it says, that provides an analysis of the relationship between the text and its intended audience, that looks at the presuppositions and implications of texts, that provides interpretations that can relate part of the text to an interpretation of the entire text, that characterizes other positions. Faculty attempt to foster an atmosphere that requires students to pay attention to what other students are saying. While it is not possible to specify all of the differences between student and faculty culture, and there is a certain fluidity to the culture and some differences among disciplines, the cultural rules are typically transmitted to faculty by

lengthy stays in graduate school and become part of the personae of members of academia, so that every academic knows what is acceptable within the culture, even if he or she cannot articulate it. Seminars in the honors program at the Community College of Philadelphia are designed to encourage students to become more self-conscious about the differences between the cultures and to invite students into the professional academic culture. Attention to the differences between beginner and professional culture prepares students to perform at a high level when they transfer to a four-year college.

The writing component of the honors program is structured around a set of writing assignments that ask students to engage in interpretive analysis of texts that can be seen as having multiple incompatible interpretations. The writing assignment develops a hermeneutical problem, similar to those discussed in seminar, by outlining a number of possible interpretations and, at the same time, showing how each of the interpretations has some inadequacies. Students are encouraged to defend one interpretation as being more adequate than others or to develop and defend their own interpretation. Student drafts are then shared with the class and one or more of them are used as the basis for discussion in faculty led writing groups. The writing groups are not intended as advice sessions for the authors. Rather, students are encouraged to treat the essay as they would a published paper: they are expected to interpret it rhetorically. Students attempt to understand what the author is doing in the paper relative to an audience. The paper is analyzed not simply as a response to the writing assignment, but as a comment in an ongoing conversation. In subsequent drafts of their papers, students are expected not only to develop their own ideas, but to respond to other student papers. The process thus follows the model of professional academic debate, where authors respond to published essays.

Beyond the reading and writing components, any successful liberal arts honors program at a community college has to address the behavioral problems that some community college honors students bring with them into the program. Students attend classes irregularly, they hand in assignments late or not at all, they make appointments with faculty and then don't keep them, they do the minimum necessary to get "C's" in their courses, they don't pay attention in class, etc. Even those students who do not exhibit these behaviors can easily find themselves pressured by their peers to adopt these habits. A successful honors program, therefore, has to be organized to block these behaviors and to encourage a rigorous attitude towards studies that will serve students well when they transfer to other colleges. This is done by setting up an alternative culture that values academic debates and that encourages a serious attitude towards academic work. (This is why only full-time study is capable of making these transformations. An alternative culture cannot be set up in a three-credit course, since this represents merely the voice of one faculty member, rather than the voice of the institution.)

Part of the culture consists of a set of strictly enforced rules and part consists of modeling of appropriate behavior by faculty and advanced students, but one additional requirement for the development of that culture is the selection of appropriate students. An honors program can accommodate students with a range of intellectual ability by building in special tutoring from faculty and by encouraging student study groups. However, it cannot tolerate slackers. Thus, students have to be selected not simply for their intellectual abilities, but also for whether they are likely to benefit from the program and whether they are likely to make a positive contribution to the development of an academic community. In other words, students have to invest in the program. An additional way of addressing behavioral problems is to build a counseling and mentoring component into the program that encourages students to reflect back onto their behavior and their attitude towards academic studies.

At the Community College of Philadelphia, honors students meet individually with faculty members who discuss their plans for the future relative to their academic history and their current work in the honors program. Faculty never discourage students from pursuing their chosen career paths in these meetings. Rather, faculty try to make clear to students the types of academic behavior they would have to exhibit in order to meet their aspirations. Students are encouraged to look at their academic behavior relative to the behavior expected of, for example, successful trial lawyers. In some cases, faculty may urge students who have the ability, but a poor self-image, to aim higher. Once again, it is a matter of comparing their performance with the performance of successful professionals and encouraging them to set their goals relative to their actual performance, rather than limiting themselves.

In addition, students can be encouraged to reflect back on their academic behavior through seminars in which students discuss texts that discuss student behavior, such as *The Shopping Mall High School* or made-up profiles of typical students. This discussion allows students to see the problems faced by non-traditional students in an academic setting in a manner that is less threatening, since they are not personally involved. At the same time, students can also be encouraged not simply to read the profiles as theoretical texts open to interpretation, but to see themselves in these situations.

The academic problems facing honors students in community colleges go beyond what could adequately be addressed in separate three-credit courses. If we are to succeed in our goal of turning out students who can succeed in competitive four-year colleges and professional life, then we need to create an academic culture in our honors programs that will move students from a student discourse community to a professional discourse community. We need honors programs that recognize that the problems faced by even the brightest community college students seeking to enter professional life, are as much cultural as intellectual, and to organize the programs' pedagogies around transforming the students by inducting them into professional culture.

Prestige Pressure

By Janet Elfers

While the advantages of community colleges seem obvious to those of us working in college counseling everyday, we should really remember that students don't always think logically or have the best resources at hand. We counselors can easily and objectively see the financial, pedagogical and personal benefits, but students don't always focus on these crucial elements when searching for postsecondary options. Let's face it—you often can't count on teenagers to make decisions based on common sense. Sadly, students tend instead to respond to the hype of media rankings and marketing, and are susceptible to the influences of their peers. They have a desire to win the approval of their parents and their community. In short, when they concentrate on gaining educational experiences that come with prestige, they have good chances of missing out on some better-fitting options.

Each year, my Midwestern suburban public school typically sends about 90 percent of our graduates to college. Each May, only about eight percent of those students tell me they plan to attend two-year community colleges. If I could get accurate follow-up data from graduates two or three years out, I suspect the actual percentage attending a community college is considerably higher. In fact, I have students completing their exit surveys in May saying they're planning to attend one of the several large four-year universities in our area, only to have them contact me just a few months later asking to have their transcript sent to a local community college instead. I suspect this is because of the negative reaction these students would get from their peers if they said they planned to attend a community college when the "senior plans" get published in the local community newspapers in the spring.

We adults think we know how much pressure students feel during the college selection process, because we often see the symptoms, but can illogical decision-making also be a symptom of the "prestige pressure?" I have learned that I must be careful to keep secret colleges where students are applying. It's amazing how many

students don't want their peers to know their choices. Not that it's anybody's business anyway, of course, but doesn't that give us a glimpse of student concern for the opinions of others— Isn't prestige at the root of that concern? Given this complication, will the student who finds that a community college fits his or her needs risk feeling inferior? Isn't it sad that students think they have to make education choices that "sound" good rather than those that "feel" good?

We must continue to arm our students with facts and features of community colleges. Let's make sure we speak respectfully about our community colleges and be supportive and enthusiastic when students show interest. Share with your students this lighthearted, Jeff Foxworthy-inspired list to see if community colleges are for them. Let's keep trying to replace the want for prestige with the need for fit!



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"Can illogical decision-making also be a symptom of the 'prestige pressure?'"

You know you're a community college student if...

- you know a good bargain when you see one
- you're anxious to get going on your career
- you don't see any point to spending thousands of dollars on room and board when your parents' home is perfectly comfortable
- you learn best when you see a concrete need for the information
- you know your learning style is such that you learn best by doing
- you're a person who prefers to feel success in smaller increments
- you've never cared about college rankings and never will
- you know you learn best in smaller classes
- you respect teachers who get to the "meat" of their content
- you appreciate and take advantage of academic help when it is offered
- you scratch your head in wonder when your peers are willing to pay \$8,000 to share a 9' x 9' concrete block room with a total stranger for nine months.